The Genizah as a Source for Jewish History

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The Cairo Genizah is the name given to a remarkable hoard of fragmentary manuscripts—and, in smaller number, printed texts—removed from a synagogue in Old Cairo, Egypt, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The manuscripts, which are estimated at more than 300,000 in total, are now dispersed across several continents in more than 50 libraries, museums, and private collections. The greatest and most famous part, consisting of more than 190,000 fragments, is known as the Taylor-Schechter Collection and is housed in Cambridge University Library. Other substantial collections are at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the John Rylands Library in Manchester, UK, the British Library, and the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford.[1]

The Cairo Genizah is not, when viewed as a whole, an archive.[2] An archive suggests organisation, the purposeful selection and storage of documents for record-keeping and potential retrieval. The Genizah is quite different: a haphazard collection of worn-out or obsolete texts, probably dropped through a hole in the wall.[3] It was stowed away for pious purposes and was not intended for reuse.

The manuscripts were recovered from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in the old Islamic capital of al-Fusṭāṭ (now known as Coptic or Old Cairo), with a smaller number coming from other locations nearby, including the al-Basātīn Cemetery.[4] Complying with a rabbinic prohibition against the haphazard discarding of sacred texts, which would leave them prey to misuse or desecration, the Jewish community of Fusṭāṭ had been depositing their worn-out holy books

and other sacred writings into the synagogue's genizah, or "sacred storeroom," over centuries.[5] In December 1896, the enterprising Cambridge scholar Solomon Schechter arrived to investigate the contents of the chamber, following the trail of a manuscript that he had been shown by two learned Scots who had recently returned from Cairo. This pair, the twin widowed sisters Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson, were ardent travellers and seekers out of ancient writings. They had journeyed through Egypt and Palestine, acquiring hundreds of fragments of Jewish manuscripts from book-dealers. When Solomon Schechter was invited to inspect their finds back in Cambridge, he was excited to discover a damaged parchment leaf containing a medieval copy of the lost Hebrew text of the book of Ben Sira, something that had not been seen since the days of Saʿadya Gaʾon in the 10th century.[6]

Setting off to Cairo to probe the source of the discovery, he was shown the genizah chamber in the Ben Ezra Synagogue. The Chief Rabbi of Egypt invited him to take away whatever interested him, and he shipped almost 200,000 fragments back to Cambridge. Schechter had expected to find mainly Bibles, prayer-books and other religious texts in the Genizah, reverently deposited there once they had come to the end of their useful lives. He was surprised to discover that the synagogue's congregation had interpreted the custom of genizah more broadly and produced a combination "of sacred lumber-room and secular record office."[7] Their deposits encompassed a remarkably wide range of written texts: from large sections of Torah scroll and the leaves of model Bible codices, through more personal, scrappy copies containing biblical readings for the festivals; tens of thousands of manuscripts of liturgical and secular poetry, much of it previously unknown; midrash and Bible commentaries; halakhic and philosophical works, including holograph drafts from Moses Maimonides and his son Abraham; and, quite unexpectedly, the abundant texts of

everyday existence, in the form of thousands of legal documents, marriage contracts, divorce bills, personal letters, commercial records, shopping-lists, doctor's prescriptions, magical amulets, and much more of the ephemera of daily life in the medieval Near East. As S. D. Goitein put it: "It is a true mirror of life, often cracked and blotchy, but very wide in scope and reflecting each and every aspect of the society that originated it. Practically everything for which writing was used has come down to us."[8] At a single stroke, Schechter had revolutionised academic Jewish studies, in what the historian Alexander Marx described as "this epoch-making event in the history of Jewish scholarship."[9]

One of Schechter's earliest publications of a text from his new Genizah Collection pointed to the revolutionary nature of the primary sources revealed there. In 1899 he published a long letter from Ḥushiʾel b. Elḥanan of Qayrawān, written in Hebrew at the beginning of the 11th century.[10] He identified the writer with one of the "four captives" in the famous tale told by Abraham ibn Dāʾūd in his *Book of Tradition* (*Sefer ha-Qabbala*, c. 1161), one of the few Jewish historical sources to cover this period. In that story, four leading rabbinical scholars are captured at sea and sold at different ports around the Mediterranean, thus spreading Torah and Talmud knowledge throughout the Jewish world. From a close reading of the lengthy letter, Schechter was able to confirm some of the details of Ibn Dāʾūd's account, such as Ḥushiʾel's origins in a Christian land, Italy, while also throwing suspicion on the more legendary elements of the tale. He concluded that, "the present letter would throw great suspicion on the whole story of the capture, and all the romantic features."[11] Schechter instead presented the bare facts that could now reliably be asserted about the episode behind the tale, given the documentary evidence, heralding a new age of critical Jewish historiography: "The whole story will, therefore, have to be reduced to the plain facts that

about the end of the tenth century certain Rabbis, for reasons unknown to us, emigrated from Italy at various times, and established schools in certain centres of Jewish population in Africa as well as in Spain."[12] With this minimalistic retelling of the tale, Schechter demonstrated the potential value of the primary sources he had brought out of Egypt in providing an important corrective to the more questionable, fanciful and polemical narratives available hitherto.[13]

Prior to the discovery of the Cairo Genizah there were very few historical sources, reliable or not, for the study of the Jews of Islamic lands in the Middle Ages, despite the fact that this comprised the vast majority of the world's Jewish population at that time. Muslim countries did not, on the whole, preserve archives, and medieval Judaism did not embrace the genre of historical writing.[14] The story of the Jews of Arab lands had to be told, therefore, from scattered references in Muslim chronicles and from predominantly literary or juridical sources; Bible commentaries, works of halakha, and responsa literature could all contain useful snippets on contemporary affairs.[15] The contents of the Genizah, however, preserve the evidence—albeit patchy and incomplete, as Goitein suggested—of centuries of Jewish culture in the Muslim world.

The period of time covered by the fragments is immense. The synagogue building dates from 1039-1041 CE. It was rebuilt on the site of an earlier synagogue, however, that itself dated perhaps from the pre-Islamic era, and had been pulled down on the orders of the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim (d. 1021), during his suppression of Christians and Jews.[16] Much manuscript material found in the Cairo Genizah predates the reconstruction of the synagogue in the 11th century and may have been stored elsewhere, perhaps arriving only

later with the different waves of Jewish immigration into Fusṭāṭ, such as the Maghribi Jews in the second half of the 11th century, or the refugees from Syria and Palestine following the invasion of the Holy Land in the First Crusade (1099).

The earliest manuscripts are, in origin, perhaps not Jewish at all. They are the under-texts of palimpsests, mainly copies of the Greek Bible, which date from the 6th and 7th centuries CE.[17] The parchment was cannibalised by Jewish scribes probably in the 9th and 10th centuries, who wrote liturgical poetry and midrashic texts over the earlier writing. Eventually these manuscripts ended their days in the Genizah as Jewish artefacts. Other literary pieces may also be dated to the pre- or early Islamic period, including some copies of the Hebrew Bible and the Aramaic targum. This is in keeping with the general longevity of literary works and with the Genizah being, in its earlier period, a collection of more narrowly defined sacred texts. The earliest dated documentary texts, however, were written in the 10th century, though earlier documents are preserved in later copies. The Genizah is particularly rich in historical documents from the late 10th through to approximately the middle of the 13th centuries, the periods of Fatimid (969-1171) and Ayyubid (1171-1250) rule in Egypt. This is reflective of the vitality of the Jewish community under the stable and relatively benign rule particularly of the Fatimids, but also the Ayyubids, the importance of Egypt as an economic hub for international trade, and the position of Fusṭāṭ as a major administrative center at that time. Thereafter, from about 1250, the documentary portion of the Genizah shrinks noticeably. This reflects the subsidiary position of Fusṭāṭ in the Mamluk period and the indigence of the Jewish population that had no choice but to remain in the town. More prosperous members of the Jewish community chose, from the late 11th century onwards, to move north, to be closer to the new city of Cairo, leaving the

immediate locale around the synagogue as a slum.[18] The Genizah does not recover from this documentary poverty until the 16th century, following the Ottoman invasion of Egypt. This brought in its wake large numbers of Jews of Spanish heritage, who following their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, settled in the Ottoman lands, including Syria, Palestine and Egypt, where they came into contact with the indigenous Arabic-speaking (*Mustʿarib*) Jewish communities. The evidence of their growing influence in these communities can be seen in the fine Sefardi handwriting and the Hebrew language that dominates in the documents of the 16th and 17th centuries. Business letters and legal deeds, written now mainly on European paper, show the involvement of Judaeo-Spanish immigrants in mercantile activity around the Mediterranean, trading in a great variety of goods with Venice and other Italian centers.[19] Manuscripts mostly give way to printed texts in the succeeding centuries, though the Genizah preserves handwritten documents from as late as the very end of the 19th century.[20] There are therefore two distinct periods in the documentary record of the Cairo Genizah: the Classical Genizah Period, whose historical sources cover the late 10th to mid-13th centuries, and the Ottoman Period, from the 16th century onwards. There are historical documents from before or in-between these two periods, but their numbers are smaller in comparison.

In addition to preserving the written detritus of many hundreds of years, the Genizah Collection also covers a wide geographical area, its manuscripts originating from as far east as Yemen, Persia, and India, and as far west as southern France and Spain. A large volume of correspondence with Jewish communities in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and the Maghrib is preserved, with smaller amounts from the Byzantine Empire and only a few from other Christian lands.[21] In the Fatimid period Fusṭāṭ was the major administrative center of the

caliphate, even after the founding of Cairo as the new capital, and it remained so for centuries, placing the Genizah synagogue at the very heart of a major Islamic empire. Before the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, the center of the civilized world for Jews had been Baghdad, and Iraqi Judaism had prospered, spreading its textual traditions and liturgical practices across the diaspora communities. From the 9-10th centuries the focus of the Jewish world moved further west, and a large number of Babylonian Jews followed the trade routes to North Africa. The Jewish communities of the Maghrib, such as Qayrawān, flourished accordingly—economically and intellectually—, and, after the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz's transfer of his capital to Cairo, the Jewish community of Egypt prospered and grew. The Ben Ezra Synagogue seems to have only acquired that name in the Ottoman period; in the Middle Ages it was known as the "Synagogue of the Palestinians" or the "Synagogue of the Jerusalemites" and it was the center of prayer and main point of meeting for the Palestinian, or Jerusalemite, community of Fusṭāṭ. This community recognized the Ga'on in Jerusalem, the head of the Palestinian Academy, as their spiritual leader, and, until the 13th century, they preserved the legal traditions and customs of worship of the Land of Israel, including the three-year (triennial) reading cycle of the Torah. In the Classical Genizah Period the Jewish community of Fusṭāṭ was divided into different parties or denominations: the two Rabbanite congregations of Palestinians and Babylonians, each with their own synagogue and local leadership, and the important Karaite Jewish community, many of the members of which had originally emigrated from Persia. The Karaites, in particular, maintained close relations with the Islamic government, and some of them rose to high rank in the Fatimid court, giving them great prestige and power in the wider Jewish community.[22] Other distinctions were made on geographical grounds, such as the large number of

Maghribi Jews in Fusṭāṭ, ~~mostly~~ many from merchant dynasties, whose wealth and political support was appreciated by the local Jerusalemite community.[23]

The Cairo Genizah as a collection has managed to preserve significant deposits from the different Jewish groups of Fusṭāṭ, despite its origins in the Palestinian Synagogue. There are documentary and literary manuscripts from the Babylonian and Karaite congregations, and even some Samaritan works. This could be evidence of the close ties that existed between them all in the Middle Ages, where cooperation was frequent and essential in the face of Islamic hegemony. Or, it could be a symptom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue's long existence, where others, such as the Synagogue of the Babylonians, have disappeared over time. In any case, there is a significantly ecumenical character to the Cairo Genizah Collection, which has preserved, for instance, not just the expected correspondence of the Palestinian Ga'on in Jerusalem, who possessed formal ties to the Synagogue of the Palestinians through his local representatives in Fusṭāṭ, but also dozens of letters (originals and copies) from his rivals, the Babylonian Ge'onim of Pumbeditha and Sura, such as Nehemiah ha-Kohen (10th century), Sherira and his son Hai (10-11th century), and Samuel b. Ḥofni (10-11th century).

Even more surprising perhaps is the survival of large numbers of Islamic documents in the Genizah: tax receipts, rescripts issued by the chanceries, and petitions to the Fatimid and Ayyubid rulers. The preservation of such documents, written in Arabic script and many having no relation to Jewish affairs at all, might call into question the whole manner in which the Genizah was assembled in the Middle Ages.[24] However, in most cases it is possible to see why the material ended up in the Collection. Even with the adoption and large-scale production of paper in Egypt—from the 10th century onwards paper tends to

replace parchment for most purposes—, writing materials were valued to the extent that a single sheet would invariably be used more than once. The Islamic chancery's long paper documents were attractive for later writers, who cut them up and wrote on the back, in the margins and even between the widely spaced lines of Arabic. The head of the Palestinian community in Fusṭāṭ in the first half of the 11th century, Efraim ben Shemarya, a wealthy businessman, frequently takes Arabic documents for his own writings and drafts of letters demonstrating that the medieval vogue for recycling was not just the preserve of the poor. Indeed, it is evident throughout the Cairo Genizah, and the reuse of manuscripts—from Bible leaves through to letters of the ge'onim—by children practising their alef-bet suggests that the storeroom may have served to provide writing materials for those who studied in the synagogue too.

Medieval archives, whether royal, ecclesiastical, or mercantile, do not usually preserve the artefacts of childhood; women, the poor, and the disadvantaged are similarly often absent. Yet all these are represented in the Cairo Genizah. Women are present as correspondents—receiving and writing letters—and as parties to legal deeds, most commonly, but not only, in matters of marriage and divorce. Their roles in the economic life of the community are recorded, and some achieved a degree of fame, or notoriety, such as the successful Jewish businesswoman al-Wuḥsha, whose documentary legacy records both her wealth and the secrets of her private life.[25] The poor, and particularly the "foreign poor," immigrants to Egypt who lacked local connections or livelihoods, are frequently encountered. The synagogue was a ~~centrer~~ center for the distribution of bread to the needy, and charitable collections were made from among the members of the congregation. Consequently, the Genizah preserves hundreds of documents relating to the disbursement of charity, the

administration of charitable foundations, and the collection of funds.[26] There are also a significant number of begging letters, petitions directed at the community's charitable administrators, the parnasim, which relate woeful tales of privation and misfortune. Ironically, this imperfect archive preserves the papers of the poor and the working classes better than it does the elite of the community. The very upper layer of society is ~~mostly~~ largely absent from the Genizah's legal deeds and correspondence, as they lived in Cairo alongside the Islamic elite, and their papers were presumably ~~deposited~~ placed in repositories there.[27]

The imperfection of the Genizah as an archive is eclipsed by its enormous geographical and temporal extent, the broad nature of its collecting, and the exhaustive evidence we can extract from its documents of daily life. It has preserved literary treasures on an incredible scale, but for the historian of the political, economic, or social history of the Jewish communities of the Islamic world, it is the rigorous legal deeds, the discursive letters, and the detailed commercial records that provide the greatest and rarest insight. The prodigious historian of the medieval Mediterranean S. D. Goitein, after a professional lifetime spent buried in the Genizah documents, believed they provided "an intimate insight … into the soul of mediaeval Eastern man."[28] While historians today might hesitate to put it in such words, few would question the astounding impact that the discovery has had on our knowledge of the medieval Jewish world.

[1] Many of the fragments have now been digitized and are available online, either through dedicated institutional digital libraries, such as Cambridge Digital Library (https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk), or through the online portal of the Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society (https://fjms.genizah.org), which now hosts images of most known Genizah fragments from collections worldwide, including many from private or otherwise difficult-to-access collections. [URLs last accessed January 15, 2018]

[2] Though some of the material may have previously been stored in separate family or business archives, before being consigned to oblivion in the Genizah. Goitein points to the papers of the Maghribi trader Nahray b. Nissim (11th c.) or the India trader Ibn Yiju (12th c.), which preserve letters to and from these notable figures as well as related legal documents, as probably having been originally individual archives. See Shelomo Dov Goitein, "The documents of the Cairo Geniza as a source for Mediterranean social history," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 80:2 (1960): 92-93.

[3] When Solomon Schechter and other explorers examined the Ben Ezra Synagogue in the 19th-century books were placed into the Genizah via an opening in the wall of the women's gallery. Since the building had been renovated and rebuilt several times in its history, it is possible that access was different in the Middle Ages. See Charles Le Quesne, "Descriptions of the Ben Ezra Synagogue from the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Fortifications and the Synagogue: the Fortress of Babylon and the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Cairo*, ed. Phyllis Lambert (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), 244-45.

[4] Jack Mosseri, a native of Egypt who retrieved manuscripts from Old Cairo in the years 1909-12, dug up material that had been buried in the precincts of the synagogue. See Jack Mosseri, "A new hoard of Jewish MSS. in Cairo," *The Jewish Review* 4 (1913-14): 210-11.

[5] On the practice of "genizah," and the origins of the Ben Ezra Genizah in particular, described there as "a kind of holy junk heap" (p. 15), see Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York: Nextbook, 2011), 12-15; and Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 11-14. Mishnah Shabbat 16:1 deals with the subject, in relation to the Sabbath: "Any of the Holy Scriptures may be saved from burning, whether they are such that are read or not. In no matter what language they are written they require to be hidden away" (in Hebrew: ṭəʾunim gəniza); translation from Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 114.

[6] The book of Ben Sira is known as the book of Ecclesiasticus in the Christian tradition, and is part of the apocrypha. Though composed in Hebrew in the 2nd century BCE, it was translated into Greek, and subsequently other languages of the Christian tradition, and the transmission of the Hebrew version came to an end in the early Middle Ages. Solomon Schechter had studied the book, collecting quotations of the Hebrew text from rabbinic and geonic works. A few years later, in an act of incredible serendipity, he was presented with a fragment of Hebrew Ben Sira from the Genizah (Cambridge University Library Or.1102), identifying it almost immediately and in "great excitement." The tale has been told many times, but rarely better than in Hoffman and Cole, *Sacred Trash*, 3-12, 43-61.

[7] Solomon Schechter, "A Hoard of Hebrew MSS," *The Times*, August 3, 1897.

[8] Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*, 5 vols. (with an index volume by Paula Sanders) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-93), here at vol. 1:9.

[9] Alexander Marx, "The Importance of the Geniza for Jewish History," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 16 (1946-47), 183.

[10] Solomon Schechter, "Geniza Specimens: A Letter of Chushiel," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 11:4 (1899): 643-50.

[11] Ibid., 645.

[12] Ibid., 646.

[13] For more on Schechter's early work on Genizah documents, see Ben Outhwaite, "Schechter's eye for the extraordinary," *Jewish Historical Studies* 48:1 (2017): 34-45. For a thorough dissection of what he calls "this simple yet baffling tale" (p. 72), and Schechter's crucial role in it, see Gerson D. Cohen, "The Story of the Four Captives," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1960-61): 55-131.

[14] Goitein, "Documents," 91; Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture. With a New Preface and an Updated Bibliography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 30-31.

[15] Particularly the latter. See, for instance, Jacob Mann, *The Responsa of the Babylonian Geonim as a Source of Jewish History* (New York: Arno Press, 1973).

[16] On the age of the original synagogue, see Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 2:148-49, where he also dismisses the canard that the synagogue had originally been a church purchased from the Christian community (that was the synagogue of the Babylonians, late arrivals to Fusṭāṭ). The earlier synagogue was probably destroyed in the persecutions of 1012-1013. See Charles Le Quesne, "The Synagogue," in *Fortifications and the Synagogue*, ed. Lambert, 84. The Ben Ezra Synagogue was renovated several times in its long history and was completely rebuilt again in 1892, shortly before Schechter's visit.

[17] On the earliest Greek palimpsests in the Genizah and whether they were written by Christians or Jews see Natalie Tchernetska, "Greek-Oriental Palimpsests in Cambridge: Problems and Prospects," in *Literacy, Education and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. Catherine Holmes and Judith Waring (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 243-56.

[18] Menahem Ben-Sasson, "The Medieval Period: The Tenth to the Fourteenth Centuries," in *Fortifications and the Synagogue*, ed. Lambert, 208.

[19] See Abraham David, "The Role of Egyptian Jews in Sixteenth-Century International Trade with Europe: A Chapter in Social-Economic Integration in the Middle East," in *"From a Sacred Source": Genizah Studies in Honour of Professor Stefan C. Reif*, ed. Ben Outhwaite and Siam Bhayro (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 99-126.

[20] The latest dated document, which is found in the Mosseri Genizah Collection, is a replacement marriage deed from Yemen, written in June 1899 for a couple who had lost their original ketubah. They must subsequently have emigrated, and the deed ended up in the hands of the collector Jack Mosseri sometime before 1912.

[21] Shelomo Dov Goitein, "The Cairo Geniza as a Source for the History of Muslim Civilisation," *Studia Islamica* 3 (1955): 77-78.

[22] On the different groups that made up the Jewish community of Fusṭāṭ, see Elinoar Bareket, *Fustat on the Nile: The Jewish Elite in Medieval Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 4-19. In the first half of the 11th century, a number of the most prominent Jews in the Fatimid court were Karaite, such as the Tustarī brothers and David b. Isaac. See Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 176-80.

[23] Bareket, *Fustat on the Nile*, 19-21.

[24] Many were written for or by Jews, such as a petition to the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin by a Jewish tax collector from Malīj, Egypt, but others concern solely Muslim or even Christian affairs, such as a petition requesting the return of a church to its community. See the important collection of Arabic documents from the Genizah published by Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[25] On the colourful broker al-Wuḫsha, see Shelomo Dov Goitein, "A Jewish Business Woman of the Eleventh Century," *Jewish Quarterly Review* New Series 57 (1967): 225-42.

[26] See Mark Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and his anthology of translated documents, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages : An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[27] Goitein, "The documents of the Cairo Geniza," 98.

[28] Goitein, "The Cairo Geniza as a Source," 91.

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